

PORTRAITS

I can still remember the first portrait my mother, Freda, painted in that cramped upstairs flat in order to have a sample she could show to prospective clients. It was a life-size oil portrait of Rita Ouimet, our next-door neighbor. I can still see Rita. A glamorous Rita Hayworth redhead, she is pictured in three-quarter pose leaning against a table. In her hands she holds a bunch of plump green grapes which droop languorously toward the table. The background is washed in a greyish-purple, probably cobalt violet mixed with viridian green with a touch of burnt umber. There is the hint of a dark green plant behind her to the left. I often wonder why I remember that portrait so vividly. Perhaps to a four-year-old the alchemy of transforming globs of color on a palette into something that resembled a real person was something of the miraculous. I had received a miniature easel and paints for Christmas one year, but try as I might, my little stick figures bore no resemblance to the real thing.

As the daughter of artists my parents often made me the subject of their portraits or illustrations or loaned me out to pose for their artist friends. Kids were definitely not made to sit immobile for long periods of time, so I was usually offered some new outfit as a bribe. Those portraits, now covering the walls in our home, provide a record of the changing fashions and my changing body through the years, a kind of slow-motion cultural history of the latter half of the twentieth century.

There I am as a baby in a series of pencil drawings Freda kept in her sketch pad. If you flip through them you can see me change from a plump newborn swaddled in blankets with a tuft of fine hair sticking straight up to a chubby six-month old sitting in my wooden high chair, to a toddler pulling around a duck on wheels. As a sprightly girl of five I appear in watercolor in a chevron-patterned bathing suit, pumping water from a well near Grandma's cottage. A year later, I am a pigtailed girl of six in a white pinafore trimmed with red rick rack, over a red, green and yellow plaid dress sitting at a table with one leg beneath me dipping my spoon into a bowl. Actually, you can't see the colors, I only remember them, because this appeared as a black and white illustration for a story in one of the Toronto papers. The artist, a friend of Freda's, had promised me a new dress and shiny new black patent leather shoes if I would pose for him. Still later, I am sitting on an old wooden kitchen chair, my hands folded demurely in my lap in a pale blue woolen sweater that is two sizes too small, knobby knees dangling beneath a pale blue skirt. I guess that was one time I didn't get a bribe. In another I am painted in three-quarters pose, my

hair, criss-crossed with braids that are tied overhead with a large blue bow. In two life-size portraits, one in oils and the other pastels, my round face is fringed with bangs and on either side pigtailed. I am wearing my favorite “Red River” coat, a navy-blue pea coat with a red sash and hood and red fringed epaulets that were once practically the winter uniform of Montreal children.

The portraits became fewer as I grew into adolescence, but there is one of me sitting in a chair reading a book. I must have been about sixteen at the time. I am wearing a tomato-red gingham dress, its dirndl skirt, bodice and sleeves trimmed with yellow rickrack. There is no title visible on the book, but it was probably one by Jane Austen, one of my favorite authors next to Dickens. A year or two later, a life-size oil portrait portrays me in my prom gown, a white organdy fluff, my blonde hair in a long pageboy. That portrait still brings back agonizing memories of a boyfriend who was a few inches shorter than me, prancing me around a Columbia University dance floor as I tried not to step all over his feet. That night I decided to break it off with him. The next day, sitting in his Chevrolet, he begged me to come back, threatening to commit suicide if I didn't .

There is one episode in my early modeling career that seems to have been different from the others. I must have been about five at the time when Freda told me that a photographer she knew thought I was very pretty and wanted me to come to his studio so he could take my photograph. I remember my mother bringing me downtown to that man's studio where I was given a sparkling white tee shirt to put on and a gold bracelet to wear. My hair, long and in soft waves was parted on the side and pinned with a barrette. The man placed me on a stool in the middle of the room while he positioned my arms. Then he disappeared. From behind a dark curtain I heard him say,

“Now smile. “No, you're not smiling. Just a small smile. Turn toward me, hold your chin up a bit. Smile, please. Now turn in the other direction, now lower your chin. Smile, please, look at me.”

Click, click, click went the shutter.

As I sat there I began to feel blood rushing into my head. My face was becoming hotter and hotter and an internal voice was shouting, “I'm not going to smile! I won't! “I won't!”

Click, click, click.

With every order from behind the curtain I became only more determined to disobey. Hotter and angrier I grew. What he intended to do with those photographs, I don't know, but he didn't get what he thought he had bargained for . . . or maybe he did.

Decades later, trying to get to the bottom of what might have triggered a PTSD breakdown three weeks after the terrorist attack on 9/11, I dug out those old photos that my mother had kept all those years to show to the therapist who was treating me. There was something about that day that I didn't understand. In the photos a five-year-old girl stares dagger-eyed at the camera. Her shoulders are slumped, her brows furrowed and her mouth downturned. What is it in those eyes? Fury, certainly, but something else.

Fear.

What happened in that studio to cause me to react like that I'll never know. My therapist thought my breakdown might have been caused by some sexual trauma earlier in my life, but all I could remember from that day was the rage.